



Indian Cinema Today

Chidananda Das Gupta

Film Quarterly, Vol. 22, No. 4. (Summer, 1969), pp. 27-35.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0015-1386%28196922%2922%3A4%3C27%3AICT%3E2.0.CO%3B2-E>

Film Quarterly is currently published by University of California Press.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/about/terms.html>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/journals/ucal.html>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

The JSTOR Archive is a trusted digital repository providing for long-term preservation and access to leading academic journals and scholarly literature from around the world. The Archive is supported by libraries, scholarly societies, publishers, and foundations. It is an initiative of JSTOR, a not-for-profit organization with a mission to help the scholarly community take advantage of advances in technology. For more information regarding JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

ings, there was built a real and admirably equipped 498-seat movie theater. All these years since, films have been thrown daily on to its screen, as a tribute to the seventh art and a continual source of pleasure and education. I nearly choked with excitement when the first program was given there and never stole down

afterwards without being intensely moved by pride and thankfulness. And, looking back now to those days so long ago and far away, and in spite of or to explain a little grumbling, I hear inwardly the words from an old hymn: "That such a light affliction should win so great a prize."

CHIDANANDA DAS GUPTA

Indian Cinema Today

The film industry of India is, depending upon which statistics you emphasize, the second, third, or fourth largest in the world.

Moreover, films have been made in India since the earliest decade of the art. How then do we explain the fact that—aside from the films of Satyajit Ray—Indian films have been unable to obtain attention in the world film scene? And what are the prospects, in the new nation that has been growing up since independence from Britain, for the curiously chaotic Indian film industry? This article, by a well-known Indian critic, film-society official, and film-maker, attempts to sketch answers to such questions.

"We must put everything into the cinema," says Jean-Luc Godard, the high priest of modern cinema. And his films leapfrog from real life to painting, literature, advertising, science, politics—connecting it all less and less by story links, and more and more by the unifying force of the film-maker's mind, turning narrative, "objective" cinema into a direct personal communication between the film-maker and his audience. But this "putting everything into the cinema" is only made possible by the film-maker's awareness of the many past forms both of cinema and of other arts, and his sense of the constantly developing interrelations of art, history, literature, science. Only this can give him an awareness

of the possibilities of the cinema, because the cinema is a medium distilled out of previous modes of expression synthesized by science. Yet, so far, only a tiny segment of India lives in the scientific ambience of the twentieth century; the rest is one enormous anachronism struggling to leap into the present.

Those of us who would like to see Indian cinema on the sophisticated level of films from the West (or Japan) tend to forget that the forces weighing down Indian cinema are special and massive. Even the most avant-garde section of the Indian film industry is still subject to crushing pressures—from both past and present.

The absorption of the twentieth-century medium of the cinema, born and developed in industrially advanced countries, into India's classical and folk culture presents enormous problems. India is one country, but has over 800 "mother tongues"; 16 languages with scripts of their own are recognized in the constitution; the diversity in religions, races, costumes, customs, food habits, looks and outlooks, cultural backgrounds is greater than within the entirety of Western civilization. The advanced middle class is one of the most liberal-minded in the world. But some tribal people still live in the neolithic age; other groups exist, as it were, in medieval times. Even the educated, once inside their homes, often go back centuries, leaving the modern world in the office and the drawingroom; they use the products of science without allowing science itself to penetrate their beings and change the structure of their minds. In India the industrial revolution began barely twenty years ago; neither its pace nor its influence is yet adequate to give the cinema—a product of science and technology—a sense of belonging to the times. Yet an average of 300 full-length features were produced and released in the last three years by 61 studios, 39 laboratories, 1,000 producers, and 1,200 distributors; films were shown in 6,000-odd theaters to an audience of more than two billion a year—the fourth largest in the world. There are films for nationwide or "all-India" distribution made in Bombay and Madras (in Hindi or its variant Hindustani) and there are regional films made in many states—of which the most numerous are the Bengali, well-known for Satyajit Ray.

For more than a century, progress in India has been the outcome of a successful synthesis of Indian tradition with a Western education in the sciences and the humanities. But this culture, brought about by Tagore, Gandhi, and Nehru, is the culture of the advanced middle class; it still leaves out the overwhelming majority of the population to whom the twentieth century and its products are only a necessary evil to be lamented. In the popular mind, you resist this *Kaliyuga* (evil eon) by mentally withholding yourself from its contamination or you are corrupted and fall from grace as defined by tradition.

Even the railway train and the radio are still unconnected facts—things that exist and must be used, but without any consciousness of where they came from or how. Science has only confused the Indian villager's philosophy and his pattern of living. The products of science have only brought vulgarity into his existence. This lack of integration between the

disparate aspects of life is a constant source of vulgarity in social manifestations and in so-called cultural phenomena—the vulgarity of synthetic, folksy art, of the garish painting of ancient temples, of the harshness of naked fluorescent tube lights, of the sons of 5-year-plan contractors playing transistors under massive banyan trees, of dignified old peasants breaking into an ugly trot to cross city streets.

With Independence came the stimulation of industrial growth, the opening up of communications (without a corresponding broadening of education), population pressures, rising prices: these ugly features of a colonial subcivilization have, instead of diminishing, multiplied themselves. Independence has lifted the cultural disciplines of anti-British politics and let loose many disparate cultural tendencies. The cultural leadership of the country has been too inadequate to bring to the masses the same synthesis between East and West which people like Tagore and Nehru brought to the advanced middle class. The failure to absorb the cinema into the Indian tradition is only a part of this larger failure.

Yet the breakdown of folk culture, the rise of an uneducated industrial working class coming into money, of middlemen who thrive on government spending, the increasing outward conformity of the *nouveaux riches* to a vulgar pseudo-Western pattern (in the absence of any other pattern), the increased mixing between men and women—all this has created the need for an entertainment formula that can cater to an increasingly common set of denominators.

The Hindi (i.e., all-India) film formula not only caters to these denominators, but also helps to create and consolidate them, giving its public certain terms of reference for its cultural adjustment, no matter how low the level of that culture and adjustment may be. It thus supplies a kind of cultural leadership, and reinforces some of the unifying tendencies in our social and economic changes. It provides an inferior alternative to the valid cultural leadership which has not emerged because of the hiatus between the intelligentsia, to which the leaders belong, and the masses—many of them living in remote corners of the country. One cold spring morning in Manali (7,000 feet up in the northwestern foothills of the Himalayas) I heard a woman's voice softly singing a Hindi film song outside my window. I went out to investigate and met a family which crosses the 14,000-foot Rohtang Pass every spring, from Lahaul Valley on the Tibet border, to seek work on this side. Every spring they go to Kulu

*The All-India
film in
full
flower.*



to the cinema there, and the wife was singing a song from a film she had seen the previous year. For her, the experience of a Hindi film once a year was a tiny window on the world beyond the Rohtang Pass.

The basic ingredients in the all-India film for the laborer from Lahaul as well as the half-educated petty bourgeois comprise not only an operatic assembly of all possible spectacles, sentiments, melodrama, music and dancing, but a mix of these calculated to appeal to the righteous inertia of the audience. In the absence of any other explanation of technological phenomena, it is the Hindi film which holds forth: "Look at the Twentieth Century, full of night clubs and drinking, smoking, bikini-clad women sinfully enjoying themselves in fast cars and mixed parties; how right you are in condemning them—in the end everyone must go back to the traditional patterns of devotion to God, to parents, to village life, or be damned forever." This answer does not try to explain; it merely echoes the natural fear which traditional people have of anything new, anything they do not understand. The films thus give reassurance to the "family audience" which is the mainstay of the film industry. They pander to the puritanism developed in the dark pre-British

period of superstition and isolationism, aided and abetted by Christian missionary teaching of the British period. They satisfy the common man's curiosity regarding the ways of the new times but do not explain them. They not only do not try to make him think; they do everything possible to stop him from thinking. Film landscapes change weirdly from Bombay to Tokyo or Delhi to Honolulu, airplanes land and big cars whiz past; the story has no logic, but the songs are delectable, the heroines glamorous, the dances carry the viewer off his feet. Yet in the end he has not sinned himself; like the Code-supervised American moviegoer of yore, he has merely inspected the sins of others before condemning them. The hero with whom he identifies has returned to his true love, the village belle, and renounced the city siren. Sin belongs to the West; virtue to India. Between the two Sharmila Tagores—one a cabaret dancer and the other a demurely Indian damsel—of *Evening in Paris*, no compromise, no middle tones are possible. The more the *nouveaux riches* rock and roll or twist and shake in blue jeans, the deeper becomes the schizophrenia between modernity and tradition in the Indian cinema. The all-India film thus paradoxically becomes the most effective obstacle against the development

of a positive attitude towards technological progress, towards a synthesis of tradition with modernity for a future pattern of living.

If India's course today is still being guided by the Tagore-Nehru dream of an East-West synthesis, the all-India film actively prevents the filtering down of that dream from the advanced middle class to the wider base of the population. It is thus a conformist, reactionary film, out to prevent social revolution rather than to encourage it. In this conformism, the censorship helps. You can criticize the prime minister in the Indian press but not in films. Occasionally when we see a corrupt policeman in a film, we are overjoyed by the liberality of the censors. It is impossible in films to go openly against the basic attitudes of the Establishment. Not only in prudery on sex but in hypocrisy on all possible things, the cinema must conform. It therefore undermines the ideas of the Establishment indirectly, but effectively.

The form of this cinema follows its content. In India film has largely been a receptacle for the mixing together of other media, rather than a medium in itself. Today's Hindi cinema lacks no acting talent; but it is not meant to be used. What passes for acting is a game between the director and the audience played with well-established types—the crying mother, the doting father, the dancing, singing, dewy-eyed heroine, the sad-faced or epileptic hero, the comic, the precocious child—in which a few mannerisms of the actor are enough for the audience to take the details for granted, so that one can proceed quickly to the climax at which someone will burst into song or dance. It is not as if serious acting or storytelling is suddenly interrupted by a song; the “action” is in fact merely a preparation for the song. Similarly the situations are stock situations, with stock responses too readymade to require any exploration of why or how something has happened; the sooner the rest of the action springing from a situation (in a night club, a swimming party, a sentimental scene between father and daughter) can be taken for granted, the better. The films are long, as folk entertainment has always been; the opposition between good and evil is sharp, as it has always been in the epics and legends. Some of the traditional characteristics of folk entertainment have been cleverly exploited to promote the opposite of the harmony with the environment which such entertainment achieved.

Today the songs are competently written, composed, and sung, as in *Sangam* (or *Union*)—at intolerably high pitch for my ears but loudly enough

to reach up to the Lahaul Valley; the dances are smartly executed, as in *Anita*; the girls are pretty (too many to name); the color is good, the sets well-designed, as in *Palki* (*Palanquin*); the locations well-selected (*Sangam*); the fights convincing, as in *Gunga Jumna* (the names of two rivers); the censor-deceiving sex-appeal cunningly contrived (*Anita*). The Hindi cinema has not only produced a pop culture, but pop songs which are comparable in rhythm, melody, and verve to those of any country: an effective concoction made of borrowings from classical and folk backgrounds, even Tagore songs and Western music. The dancing is similarly culled from all conceivable styles but gells into the sprightly form of *Vaijyanthimala* (a Southern dancing star), leaving no dull moment to be dedicated to thought. But in spite of its competence and its verve, it is neither Indian, nor cinema.

Yet with the erosion of the traditional forms of folk entertainment and the trek into the cities in search of employment, this cinema (in the absence of television) quickly established itself as the only diversion of the public—fulfilling its diverse needs for drama, music, farce, dancing, escape into illusions of high living, into fantastic dreams of sin and modernity from which to return to the daily grind.

The sixties found the Hindi cinema spiralling up in costs as it expanded in spectacle; diseases which had been inherent in the system since the war broke out into a first-class crisis when 60 out of 70 Bombay films, each costing over half a million dollars, failed at the box office in 1967. Well over 60% of the production costs went to meet the fees of the stars. With each star acting in several films at the same time, the annual income of some of them (in a country with an average per capita income of some \$50 a year) is higher than that of the top Hollywood stars. Since the money is “black” and mostly paid under the counter, the Indian star's income-tax worries are rather less than those of his Hollywood counterpart. No wonder the films which are so aptly described by journalists as the “vehicles” of these stars are unreal from start to finish.

“Black money” originated during the scarcities of the wartime years, when the spoils of large-scale profiteering stayed outside the banks; it has remained there ever since. An industry which costs more in services than in goods offered an excellent area for this unaccounted and untaxed wealth to hide and multiply. The moneybags offered fantastic sums to the stars to wean them away from the studios, which were soon forced to close down. Since then, Indian production has been completely “in-

INDIAN CINEMA

dependent" everywhere except the South. "Independents" dependent on stars are hardly likely to be able to hold their own against them. Now the inevitable has happened. The economics of the blockbuster have over-reached the economic potential of the single formula, however perfect. In imitating Hollywood, the mass film in India has landed itself in a star system without studio control, formula film-making without Hollywood's variety of formulas, an annual investment of some 85 million dollars without Hollywood's audience research or other organizational safeguards.

The trouble with the Hindi cinema is not that it is commercial; all film industries in the world, including the state-owned ones, are commercial because they cannot go on throwing away money on films which people do not want to see. The trouble is that other film industries do two things that the Hindi cinema does not (for the simple reason that it is incapable): produce films at many levels ranging from pure art to pure commerce, and occasionally bowl over the art critic and the box office with the same film. Diligently, the Hindi cinema has perfected its one and only formula. It has had no John Ford turning out Westerns, no Milestone making memorable war films, no Hitchcock to hold us in thrall, no Minnelli, no Donen to make it by music alone. It has no genres. It is impossible to make, in our national cinema, anything like *Judgment at Nuremberg* or *Advise and Consent* or *The Best Man* although our guru has been Hollywood. It makes no adult films for the literate middle class. It is idle to draw much comfort from Basu Bhattacharya's *Teesri Kasam* (*The Third Vow*) or *Uski Kahani* (*Her Tale*) or Hrishikesh Mukherjee's *Anupama* (name of a girl); in any case these films are significant only in the context of the Hindi cinema. All that they may mean in the end is the reappearance of some sort of middle-class film on the Hindi market. Even with the fullest freedom, what was the net achievement of such stalwart directors as Shantaram or Bimal Roy? Shantaram had some honest intentions, some cinematic gimmicks wrapped up in execrable taste; his *Jhanak Jhanak* (*Ankle Bells Tinkle*) and *Shakuntala* (heroine of a Sanskrit play) have done as much harm to Indian cinema as Robi Barmas's naturalism did to Indian painting. Bimal Roy, except in the first half of *Do Bigha Zamin* (*Two Acres of Land*) stayed with melodrama and sentimentality in slightly better taste. In Raj Kapoor's *Sangam* the audience is asked to believe that two adult men, whose dedication to friendship is almost pathological, take twenty reels to find out

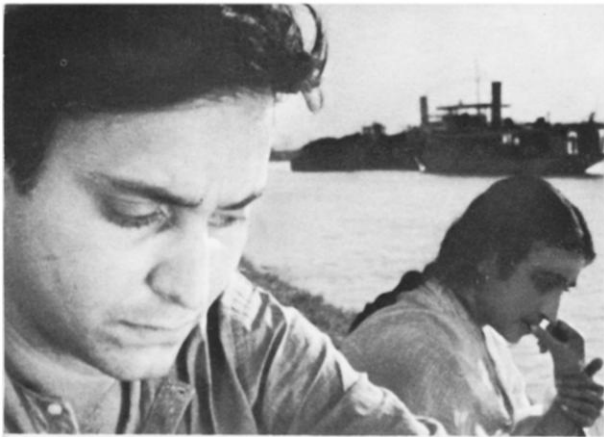


*Village India as portrayed in the all-India film.
Ramu Kariat's CHEMMEEN.*

that they are in love with the same girl. Traditionally, narrative literature has asked for the suspension of disbelief; the Kapoorian phantasmagoria demands the total surrender of the rational part of man, leaving the animal staring dumbly at helicopters and locations in Europe. The problem is not one of freedom; it is one of cynicism, ignorance, and cultural underdevelopment. That is why, when it decides to be good or tries to be "art," Hindi cinema is dreadfully self-conscious, didactic, and pretentious.

The regional film, as we shall see, has its roots, its sense of identity; it tends to underplay the common factors arising in the country and stresses elements of regional tradition with some pride and nostalgia. In the all-India film, no male character except the villain can wear Indian costume; in the regional film almost the opposite is true. The regional film likewise shows more of rural and urban lower-middle-class life. The all-India film, anxious to avoid pronouncedly regional characteristics in its search for wide acceptability, avoids these and weaves its fancies round high-income brackets where Westernized uniformity is more easily available. There is thus a greater sense of reality and cultural integrity in the regional film; it is Indian, even when it is not cinema. Its main concerns are with social problems, as in literature.

The position was much the same with the Hindi film until the war. In the days of Bombay talkies and films like *Achut Kanya* (*Untouchable Girl*) or *Jivan Prabhat* (*The Dawn of Life*), the attitudes of the Bombay film (or the Madras Hindi film) and the Bengali film from Calcutta were more or less the same. They shared the social reformist zeal of the advanced middle class of those times, as much as literature or journalism. The evils of caste, the right to love before marriage, the tragic taboo



Mrinal Sen's *PUNASCHA*, with Soumitra Chatterjee.

against widow remarriage, ideas of individualism, secularism, and democracy provided the subject matter of most films whether in regional languages or in Hindi. The form was by no means cinematic but the content was definitely Indian. It was much closer to the ideals of the country's leadership than today.

The shortages of the war not only brought about "black money," high star fees, and the end of studio production, but initiated a profound change in the character of the audience of the Hindi cinema. With the war-time emphasis on production began the rise of the industrial working class. In independent India the process was further emphasized with labor legislation and encouragement of trade unionism. But industry made progress out of all proportion to education, whose standards have in fact declined with the population pressure. In comparison to the landless laborer whose name is legion, the industrial working class became a privileged minority. In this it became bracketed with other *nouveau riche* sections of society, such as those that bag the contracts and subcontracts of the massive five-year plans. To these were added, in the sixties, the dealers in food grains and the big and the middle farmers who made killings during the food shortages. In other words, the Hindi cinema after the war found itself forced to address its appeal to a culturally impoverished *nouveau riche* audience, increasingly disoriented from the cultural ambitions of new India and falling back on a schizophrenic solution of being extremely conservative inside and outwardly ultramodern. The educated minority in the Hindi-speaking areas accepted this cinema as much as the masses, in the absence of an alternative. With this change in the nature of the audience, the Hindi cinema emerged as the all-India cinema by virtue of the position of Hindi as the lingua franca of the country; and the get-rich-quick financiers turned

INDIAN CINEMA

away from social zeal to a cynical-conformist formula of Westernized sin-parade ending in the triumph of tradition.

Inevitably, due to the economics of scale and the spread of new "all-India" denominators, the regional cinemas receded before the impact of the Hindi film. Color filming has become virtually impossible in Bengal, for instance. Even Satyajit Ray was forced to drop his color plans and make his latest film *Goopi Gain Bagha Bain* (based on a fantasy by his grandfather) in black and white. But the film audience in Bengal has remained basically middle class and by and large educated. This is more or less true of all regional cinemas, and gives them greater artistic potential than the all-India field, as we have seen in the break-through of Satyajit Ray, who reflected a resolution of our cultural dilemmas not in terms of its lowest common denominators, but its highest. Ray translated the value world of Tagore into the content and technique of advanced cinema and tried to extend it to contemporary, post-Tagore situations as well. This he was able to do with success, not because the Western world could recognize in it the signposts of India's evolution into the modern world, but because he was able to attract an audience—a fairly sophisticated middle-class audience—on his home ground in Bengal. Here was the Tagore-Nehru dream of a new Indian identity—enshrined in the law and official goals of the country yet repudiated by the mass cinema—at its best.

But Ray's position in India is not just unique; it is one of splendid isolation. Although his genius is recognized not only by intellectuals but by the average audience in Bengal and by the film industry all over the country, his influence, in relation to his reputation, must be considered negligible. In a characteristically Indian way, film-makers have put him on a pedestal for admiration from a safe distance. He is an exception, a phenomenon, an object of pride for India like the Konarak temple or Benares textiles. Film-makers think of modelling their work on his no more than they think of building a Taj Mahal to live in. The juggernaut of Indian cinema grinds on.

The Marathi cinema, the only other considerable regional cinema outside the South, was fatally weakened by the expanding Hindi film audience; if it still exists today, it is not due to its inherent strength but to governmental oxygen which keeps it breathing.

It is only at the level of art that the regional film can survive, as the Bengali film has done so far. If

INDIAN CINEMA

Satyajit Ray and other new film-makers did not emerge, the Bengali film would go the way of the Marathi. The only other and somewhat doubtful prescription, which is being tried by some today, is to rouse regional passions and summon them to the aid of the local film. Even this, like the governmental rescue operation, can at best be temporary and partial aid in the recovery. The average Bengali, or any other regional film imitating the all-India pattern or being nostalgic in a heavy-handed, namby-pamby way, is becoming as unbearable to the average audience as it has always been to the sophisticated. In fact the Bengali film enjoys an undeservedly high reputation because of a few artistic successes; the average Bengali film remains a dreadfully dull opiate for a sleepy middle class. For the more contemporary-minded viewer, some films do keep appearing which reflect his restlessness, but the difference between these and the rest seems unbridgeable. The films of Ritwik Ghatak, who has not done anything since *Subarnarekha* (the name of a river in West Bengal), Mrinal Sen, whose *Akash Kusum* (*Up in the Clouds*) was a box-office failure and made him seek distinction in Oriya in his brilliant *Matira Manisha* (*Child of the Earth*), not to speak of Satyajit Ray who made the latest of a series of masterpiece and near-masterpieces with *Charulata*, are far removed from the average Bengali product. Directors like Tapan Sinha and Tarun Majumdar (also to a lesser extent Arup Guha Thakurta and Hari Sadhan Das Gupta) have brought good taste and competent story-telling to present-day Bengali cinema, whereas others have faded away after brief spells of "experiment" whose purpose has in some cases been vague even to themselves—notably Rajen Tarafdar in *Ganga*, Barin Saha in *Tero Nadir Parey* (*Beyond Thirteen Rivers*), Purnendu Patra in *Swapna Niye* (*Of Man's Dreams*). Pushed to the wall, the Bengali cinema is fighting back hard, trying to find in box office-cum-art what it cannot in terms of the lavishness and sprightliness of Hindi film. In Tarun Majumdar's *Balika Bodhu* (*Child Bride*) or Arundhati Devi's *Chhuti* (*Vacation*) it has absorbed something of the creative techniques of Ray, Ghatak and Sen, and turned it into the routine of mediocre poets and the stuff of the box office. The leadership of culture which lay for some ten years in the domain of the cinema is fast moving into the amateur theater, which now provides greater freedom to the artist.

The states of Assam and Orissa have not yet done anything to save themselves from the future pressures of the all-India film either in terms of solid



Ritwik Ghatak's KOMAL GANDHAR.

box-office foundations or the escape route of art. The Oriya audience completely rejected Mrinal Sen's *Matira Manisha*—imaginative, sensitively photographed and acted, and directed with a big heart—because it does not conform to its source, a novel; obviously the Oriyas are not yet ready for the sophistications of the film medium, and must stick to the copy book of the filmed theater. I have no doubt that they will rediscover the film after ten years of industrial development.

Madras made its dent into Bombay's monopoly of the Hindi market as early as 1948 with S. S. Vasan's *Chandralekha* (a woman's name); although South India provides a large enough audience to sustain a regional cinema, it has made regular forays outside its natural boundaries and Southern films still appear on the all-India screen. The "common" factors are developing here too, enabling many Tamil films to come out in Hindi versions to compete—often successfully—with the all-India film. The fact that South India has something of a unity of its own, despite the existence of many languages, has given its regional film a wider audience than the Oriya, Assamese, or Bengali film whose audience is virtually confined to its own linguistic area. Telegu (state of Andhra, middle south-East) actors appear often in Tamil (state of Madras, deep South-East), Malayalam (state of Kerala, deep South-West) films get easily shown in Madras, the Kanarese (state of Mysore, middle middle South) film is more easily understood in Andhra than is the case with films in the North Indian languages. Binding them together, however, is the formula of song-dance-melodrama in which reality is of little consequence. This formula precludes the cinema of narrative illusion; it is unabashed spectacle, vulgarized but closer to traditions of popular variety shows than to literature or drama. Even its music and dance are breaking out of the tradition of the



Satyajit Ray's CHARULATA.

Carnatic system and picking up the postures of the Hindi cinema of Bombay. It is only in superficialities that it maintains some semblance of regionalism.

There have been minor exceptions to this; D. Jayakantan has shown a superior sensibility for literary-dramatic values (more than cinematic ones) in *Unnai pol Oruvan* (*In the Jeweler's Balance*). The Malayali cinema, always of a more literary nature than the Tamil, has thrown up over-rated, but above-the-local-average films like *Neelakuvil*, jointly directed by Ramu Kariat and P. Bhaskaran, on untouchability and unmarried motherhood. The Malayali cinema, like the Bengali and Marathi, has remained occupied with social problems—a concern which the Tamil cinema abandoned long ago in order to catch up with the all-India box office. The work of the mildly interesting South Indian directors has sometimes been praised beyond all proportion because of its rarity and because of the general lack of understanding of the film medium or its achievements in other countries and periods. The malaise here is worse than the hero worship of the

INDIAN CINEMA

late P. C. Barua in Bengal and of Shantaram in Maharashtra as geniuses of the cinema—as if their work was comparable to that of Eisenstein or Dreyer, Ford or Renoir.

The fact is that although some of these directors and films have borne a slight stamp of individuality, an ardor for a good cause, snatches of realism and touches of cinema, even some emotional power within their own notions of drama, they never really left the framework of the filmed theater and the variety show; at best they groped towards the language of the cinema. Discussing nine South Indian social films of 1964 which received regional awards from the Government of India, S. Krishnaswamy wrote: "In nearly all the nine films, the climax is developed with illness, death or accident. Five have hospital scenes, one has a scene of chronic illness building up to a climax, and the three others feature suicide, murder and death by accident. The doctor is a favorite character. Disputes are resolved by offering blood to the dying, sympathy created by being in bed."

Of the background music he says: "You hear the same set of notes in similar situations on the screen, as though a common track is used from a music library." And finally of D. Jayakantan's *Unnai pol Oruvan* (*In the Jeweler's Balance*): "It is conceived more as a drama than as a screenplay. It conveys less by vision than by words. Except for one, the performances are superb, the material surroundings are much less convincing than the people themselves. The art direction is unimaginative, photography uneven, and editing poorly conceived . . . Jayakanthan has not produced an outstanding film, but it is a milestone in southern film history." ("Madras Letter," *Indian Film Culture*, No. 6)

I believe that in terms of box-office economics, the fate of the regional film, perhaps sooner elsewhere than in the South, is sealed. It is only in terms of art that the Bengali cinema, the Oriya or the Assamese, or the newly identity-proud Gujrati and Konkani film, will survive in the end, bolstered up by state finances or art theaters or whatever mechanics we eventually arrive at for making it possible to have artistic films for a minority audience. (In a country like India, even a minority is large enough to contend with—it may surpass the population of Scandinavia.)

And there is no doubt that a minority audience is fast coming into being, thanks to the international film festivals, film societies, film institutes, formidable new forces in the documentary (which has thrown up a number of good films in the last three

years), film archives, serious film magazines, state recognition for good films, state finance, and a wider spread of import sources. These forces, despite occasional signs of defeat, are in fact gathering some strength; more people are beginning to get a taste of real cinema and becoming impatient to try their hand at the medium, to hold their doors wide open to influences and examples from all over the world. Their dissatisfactions and creative urges are bound to find expression, sooner or later, in a kind of cinema which may or may not cater to the vast pop-

ulace, but will find sufficient buyers to break out into art theaters and the film-club circuit (now consisting of about a hundred groups). Under its pressures, even the commercial cinema may have to undergo at least superficial changes in form, although perhaps not in spirit. The trail blazed by the Bengalis is already being followed by other regions who might also find paths of their own; and the total impact of India's regional films—like the best of the Bengali—may yet be memorable in world cinema.

Film Reviews

MARKETA LAZAROVA

Director: Frantisek Vlácil. Script: Frantisek Pavlicek and Vlácil, from the novel by Vladislav Vancura. Camera: Bedrich Batka. Score: Zdenek Liska. Československy Film; no U.S. distributor as yet.

The historical film generally has a very bad name—and richly deserved. "Costume pictures" from DeMille onward have been synonymous with the worst in movie excesses: the grotesqueries of *The Scarlet Empress* with Dietrich as Catherine the Great, Laughton deliciously and atrociously hamming it up as Henry VIII, the kimono-swishing revenges of *Chushingura*, Burt Lancaster sleepwalking through Visconti's static landscapes in *The Leopard*—actor and set-designer films gone adrift in overblown fantasies of a melodramatic past. The historical picture has lately taken a theatrical turn with modestly filmed plays such as *A Man for All Seasons* and *Lion in Winter*, but these are hardly movies at all, much less good movies; they have the advantage of attracting fine stage performers, but they do not even broach the real (and interesting) problems of relating film and theater, and simply allow their actors to march about declaiming lines and confronting one another. In *Virginia Woolf*, *Marat/Sade*, and *The Brig* we have had intriguing experiments in theatricalized film, but what we have had from the historical film is mostly romances, battles, escapes, and lots of cleavage.

Marketa Lazarova, which takes place in the thirteenth-century in what is now Czechoslo-

vakia, is without a doubt the best historical film ever made anywhere—not that it has much serious competition. Its only rivals are those elegantly formal (and actually time-less) masterpieces, *The Passion of Joan of Arc* and *Alexander Nevsky*. It is like some archaeological record that has suddenly become animated; it makes you feel as if you've been plunged into some widescreen time-capsule. (The only recent film footage at all relevant to it is the "Lang" fragments in Godard's *Le Mépris*, where strange painted Greeks climb out of the sea.) There is virtually no trace in it of modern man; a character played by Charlton Heston would be as out of place in it as a hairy mastodon in Rockefeller Plaza.

Generally the makers of historical films engage in a simpleminded substitution game: they put comfortably contemporary characters into fresh wigs and costumes, and ask us to imagine they are Napoleon or Toulouse-Lautrec—but the plot machinery and the thinking of the characters are unutterably and unredeemably modern. There is not a character and not a situation in *Marketa Lazarova* which could have been imagined by a Hollywood scriptwriter. Nothing in it is charming or picturesque. Hair is matted, filth is routine; none of the living arrangements are at all familiar.

Partly as a result of this, and partly from its complex structure, the film is initially as confusing as it would be to actually arrive in such an alien culture. We don't at first have the faintest